Aniccā Vata Saṅkhārā

by

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A*NICCĀ vata saṅkhārā*—"Impermanent, alas, are all formations!"—is the phrase used in Theravāda Buddhist lands to announce the death of a loved one, but I have not quoted this line here in order to begin an obituary. I do so simply to introduce the subject of this essay, which is the word *saṅkhārā* itself. Sometimes a single Pāli word has such rich implications that merely to sit down and draw them out can shed as much light on the Buddha's teaching as a long expository article. This is indeed the case with the word *saṅkhārā*. The word stands squarely at the heart of the Dhamma, and to trace its various strands of meaning is to get a glimpse into the Buddha's own vision of reality.

The word *saṅkhārā* is derived from the prefix *saṃ*, meaning "together," joined to the noun *kāra*, "doing, making." *Saṅkhāras* are thus "co-doings," things that act in concert with other things, or things that are made by a combination of other things. Translators have rendered the word in many different ways: formations, confections, activities, processes, forces, compounds, compositions, fabrications, determinations, synergies, constructions. All are clumsy attempts to capture the meaning of a philosophical concept for which we have no exact parallel, and thus all English renderings are bound to be imprecise. I myself use "formations" and "volitional formations," aware this choice is as defective as any other.

However, though it is impossible to discover an exact English equivalent for *saṅkhārā*, by exploring its actual usage we can still gain insight into how the word functions in the "thought world" of the Dhamma. In the suttas the word occurs in three major doctrinal contexts. One is in the twelvefold formula of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), where the *saṅkhāras* are the second link in the series. They are said to be conditioned by ignorance and to function as a condition

for consciousness. Putting together statements from various suttas, we can see that the *saṅkhāras* are the kammically active volitions responsible for generating rebirth and thus for sustaining the onward movement of *saṃsāra*, the round of birth and death. In this context *saṅkhārā* is virtually synonymous with *kamma*, a word to which it is etymologically akin.

The suttas distinguish the *saṅkhāras* active in dependent origination into three types: bodily, verbal, and mental. Again, the *saṅkhāras* are divided into the meritorious, demeritorious, and "imperturbable," i.e., the volitions present in the four formless meditations. When ignorance and craving underlie our stream of consciousness, our volitional actions of body, speech, and mind become forces with the capacity to produce results, and of the results they produce the most significant is the renewal of the stream of consciousness following death. It is the *saṅkhāras*, propped up by ignorance and fueled by craving, that drive the stream of consciousness onward to a new mode of rebirth, and exactly where consciousness becomes established is determined by the kammic character of the *saṅkhāras*. If one engages in meritorious deeds, the *saṅkhāras* or volitional formations will propel consciousness toward a happy sphere of rebirth. If one engages in demeritorious deeds, the *saṅkhāras* will propel consciousness toward a miserable rebirth. And if one masters the formless meditations, these "imperturbable" *saṅkhāras* will propel consciousness toward rebirth in the formless realms.

A second major domain where the word *saṅkhāras* applies is among the five aggregates. The fourth aggregate is the *saṅkhāra-khandha*, the aggregate of volitional formations. The texts define the *saṅkhāra-khandha* as the six classes of volition (*cha cetanākāyā*): volition regarding forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and ideas. Though these *saṅkhāras* correspond closely to those in the formula of dependent origination, the two are not in all respects the same, for the *saṅkhāra-khandha* has a wider range. The aggregate of volitional formations comprises *all* kinds of volition. It includes not merely those that are kammically potent, but also those that are kammic results and those that are kammically inoperative. In the later Pāli literature the *saṅkhāra-khandā* becomes an umbrella category for all the factors of mind except feeling and perception, which are assigned to aggregates of their own. Thus the *saṅkhāra-khandha* comes to include such ethically variable factors as contact, attention, thought, and energy; such wholesome factors as generosity, kindness, and wisdom; and such unwholesome factors as greed, hatred, and delusion. Since all these factors arise in conjunction with volition and participate in volitional activity, the early Buddhist teachers decided that the most fitting place to assign them is the aggregate of volitional formations.

The third major domain in which the word *saṅkhārā* occurs is as a designation for all conditioned things. In this context the word has a passive derivation, denoting whatever is formed by a combination of conditions; whatever is conditioned, constructed, or compounded. In this sense it might be rendered

simply "formations," without the qualifying adjective. As bare formations, *saṅkhāras* include all five aggregates, not just the fourth. The term also includes external objects and situations such as mountains, fields, and forests; towns and cities; food and drink; jewelry, cars, and computers.

The fact that *saṅkhāras* can include both active forces and the things produced by them is highly significant and secures for the term its role as the cornerstone of the Buddha's philosophical vision. For what the Buddha emphasizes is that the *saṅkhāras* in the two active senses—the volitional formations operative in dependent origination, and the kammic volitions in the fourth aggregate—construct the *saṅkhāras* in the passive sense: "They construct the conditioned; therefore they are called volitional formations. And what are the conditioned things they construct? They construct the body, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness; therefore they are called volitional formations" (SN XXII.79).

Though external inanimate things may arise from purely physical causes, the *saṅkhāras* that make up our personal being—the five aggregates—are all products of the kammically active *saṅkhāras* that we engaged in our previous lives. In the present life as well the five aggregates are constantly being maintained, refurbished, and extended by the volitional activity we engage in now, which again becomes a condition for future existence. Thus, the Buddha teaches, it was our own kammically formative *saṅkhāras* that built up our present edifice of personal being, and it is our present formative *saṅkhāras* that are now building up the edifices of personal being we will inhabit in our future lives. These edifices consist of nothing other than *saṅkhāras* as conditioned things, the conditioned formations comprised in the five aggregates.

The most important fact to understand about *saṅkhāras*, as conditioned formations, is that they are all impermanent: "Impermanent, alas, are formations." They are impermanent not only in the sense that in their gross manifestations they will eventually come to an end, but even more pointedly because at the subtle, subliminal level they are constantly undergoing rise and fall, forever coming into being and then, in a split second, breaking up and perishing: "Their very nature is to arise and vanish." For this reason the Buddha declares that all *saṅkhāras* are suffering (*sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*)—suffering, however, not because they are all actually painful and stressful, but because they are stamped with the mark of transience. "Having arisen they then cease," and because they all cease they cannot provide stable happiness and security.

To win complete release from suffering—not only from experiencing suffering, but from the unsatisfactoriness intrinsic to all conditioned existence—we must gain release from *saṅkhāras*. And what lies beyond the *saṅkhāras* is that which is not constructed, not put together, not compounded. This is Nibbāna, accordingly called the Unconditioned—*asaṅkhata*—the opposite of what is *saṅkhata*, a word which is the passive participle corresponding to

saṅkhārā. Nibbāna is called the Unconditioned precisely because it's a state that is neither itself a *saṅkhārā* nor constructed by *saṅkhāras*; a state described as *visaṅkhāra*, "devoid of formations," and as *sabbasaṅkhāra-samatha*, "the stilling of all formations."

Thus, when we put the word *saṅkhāra* under our microscope, we see compressed within it the entire worldview of the Dhamma. The active *saṅkhāras* consisting in kammically active volitions perpetually create the *saṅkhāra* of the five aggregates that constitute our being. As long as we continue to identify with the five aggregates (the work of ignorance) and to seek enjoyment in them (the work of craving), we go on spewing out the volitional formations that build up future combinations of aggregates. Just that is the nature of *saṃsāra*: an unbroken procession of empty but efficient *saṅkhāras* producing still other *saṅkhāras*, riding up in fresh waves with each new birth, swelling to a crest, and then crashing down into old age, illness, and death. Yet on it goes, shrouded in the delusion that we're really in control, sustained by an ever-tantalizing, ever receding hope of final satisfaction.

When, however, we take up the practice of the Dhamma, we apply a brake to this relentless generation of *saṅkhāras*. We learn to see the true nature of the *saṅkhāras*, of our own five aggregates: as unstable, conditioned processes rolling on with no one in charge. Thereby we switch off the engine driven by ignorance and craving, and the process of kammic construction, the production of active *saṅkhāras*, is effectively deconstructed. By putting an end to the constructing of conditioned reality, we open the door to what is ever-present but not constructed, not conditioned: the *asaṅkhata-dhātu*, the unconditioned element. This is Nibbāna, the Deathless, the stilling of volitional activities, the final liberation from all conditioned formations and thus from impermanence and death. Therefore our verse concludes: "The subsiding of formations is blissful!"

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